



Figuring Trauma in Christopher Nolan's *Memento*

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Introduction

Christopher Nolan's film, *Memento*, is about an individual experience of physical trauma leading to short-term memory syndrome in the central character. The film presents the story of an insurance investigator, Leonard Shelby, who is hunting for the murderer of his wife. Following a vicious attack that led to his wife's death, Leonard Shelby¹ has sustained a blow to the head that resulted in short-term memory loss. "Leonard has anterograde amnesia, impairing his ability to store memories of recent events²." Since he is unable to remember things, he tattoos vital information on his body and he uses Polaroid instant pictures as substitutes for his failing memory. Unable to make new memories following the brain injury he sustained during the night his wife was murdered and feeling guilty for failing to protect her, Leonard Shelby from San Francisco, played by Guy Pierce, hopes of getting "his fucking life back," as he puts it. From this very moment on, his single mission in life is to investigate, find and kill the person who murdered his wife. Emotionally traumatized by his loss and psychologically diminished by his failing memory, Leonard Shelby has to sort out not only intricate clues, but he must also distinguish friends from foes as he struggles to accomplish his new life mission.

As the main narrator and central protagonist around whom others converge, Leonard Shelby embodies trauma, its shaping force, and distorting influence. On the one hand, he struggles against forgetting and with his obsessive desire for revenge, on the other. As a traumatized individual, Shelby "is precisely [to be] possessed by an image or event³" (Caruth,4-

¹ Throughout this paper, I am going to use interchangeably Leonard, or Leonard Shelby to designate the main protagonist.

² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memento_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memento_(film))

³ Cathy Caruth, *Exploring Trauma*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University, 1995.



5). In fact, Shelby's body has absorbed the tragic event, which is re-inscribed on it, transforming it into the new site of re-memory.

Shelby's relentless quest for revenge coupled with his inability to retain new memories make him a character, whose fluid and unstable subjectivity, struggles with that of the viewers. Though sympathetic with Leonard, spectators cannot be in his shoes. To identify with Leonard Shelby is to lose our sense of wholeness. In this case, what the spectator can do is, to listen, to watch, to witness Leonard Shelby's battle to make sense of his existence and follow his attempt to "get his life back." Broadly speaking, Shelby's story unfolds as a triangular relationship between him, Teddy (Joe Pantoloni) and Natalie (Ann Rose Moss) delineating homo-social and heterosexual dynamics. These triangular relationships are mainly based on money, sex and the desire for revenge.

This paper argues that Nolan's cinematographic techniques pinpoint an aesthetic of trauma that emerges at the interplay between trauma, memory, and forgetting. As an individual personal experience of trauma, witnessing, memory and post-memory, it is my argument that the fragmentation of *Memento's* narrative line of the past into present, through "flash-forwards" and the "reversal" of the chronological line of the narrative figure the depth of a traumatic loss and the inability of remembering to forget. I would also suggest that the director Christopher Nolan used editing techniques to subvert the defining features of the film noir. In doing so, Nolan posits the traumatic incident (death of his wife/ blow to Leonard's head) as a trope, an organizing principle of the structure of the film. The blow to Leonard's head signals the original traumatic moment, which coupled with his wife's death, generated chaotic ramifications in his life. Thus, Leonard, the helpless and traumatized character, is ironically enough, the agent/narrator who bears witness by retelling the events as a recollection of his unstable memory.

I/Figuring Trauma

Christopher Nolan's opening credit shows a brutal crime scene. Shot in the head at close range, a man is laying on the floor. His killer is fanning a picture whose colors gradually fade away. The decaying of the picture is coupled with rewinding motion. Thus the photograph jumps back in the Polaroid camera, so does the bullet into the gun. These pictures signal the



whole structure of *Memento*. First, the fading colors of a picture moves back in the camera, the bullet jumps back into the barrel of the gun held by Leonard, the blood slowly retrieves, and Teddy's glasses are repositioned on his face. A gunshot and a scream violently introduce us to the film. The fading of the colors of the original photography signals the gradual defocusing and underlines the backward motif. Commenting on the regressive structure of the film, Andy Klein argues in "Everything You Wanted to Know About Memento" that:

Unlike "The Sixth Sense" and "The Usual Suspects" -- indeed, unlike almost every other celebrated "puzzle film" in cinematic history -- "Memento's" puzzle can't be undone with a simple declarative explanatory sentence. Its riddles are tangled up in a dizzying series of ways: by an elegant but brain-knotting structure; by an exceedingly unreliable narrator through part of the film; by a postmodern self-referentiality that, unlike most empty examples of the form, thoroughly underscores the film's sobering thematic meditations on memory, knowledge and grief; and by a number of red herrings and misleading clues that seem designed either to distract the audience or to hint at a deeper, second layer of puzzle at work -- or that may, on the other, simply suggest that, in some respects, the director bit off more than he could chew.

The beginning of the film pinpoints the denaturalization process of the cinematographic narrative techniques in the sense that "each color sequence presents matching shots, both at the beginning and at the end. Shots which are shared with the preceding and with the following sequences, using a precise disposition⁴." This chain of composition and recomposition of the

⁴ Andy Klein, "Everything you wanted to know about memento." (Thurs. June 28, 2001) Salon.com. http://archive.salon.com/ent/movies/feature/2001/06/28/memento_analysis/index.html. Retrieved 2010-06-16.



movie underlines the repetitiveness of the traumatic event and sets memory as a return of the past.

The first five minutes of the film are totally controlled by an omniscient narrator who shows us a climax of the story with the killing of Teddy. As Mathew Prins points out “director Christopher Nolan presents Leonard’s experience to the audience in those same five- to ten-minutes segments, with one twist: the segments in reverse chronological order. The film’s inverted trajectory, manages to put viewers as close to Leonard’s predicament as possible without confusing them....”

This silent sequence of the film is a metonymy, that is, a fragment representative of the large and deep structure of the film. The story seems to be telling itself as a moment of objectivity in that no one speaks; the spectator sees with his/her own eyes the events as they unfold. The erasure of subjectivity stands as a “degree zero” of the narration as mimesis. This initial moment seems to become possible when the camera catches what is happening in its optics. Unlike *Mildred Pierce* which opens with a murder, but it is unclear who the murderer is until the different threads of the whole story unfold, in *Memento*, finding the murderer(s) is intricately linked to understanding how memory works and mimics the narrative structure of the film.

The typology of *Memento* as a whole is a symptomatic representation of the mind and unreliable memory of the narrator. The spectator is helpless because the fragments of the story do not fit together so as to solve the puzzle. The film is a double enigma because of its intricate plot and investigative structure. As Ann Kaplan points out in her comment on film noir: “The plots of noir thrillers are frequently impossible to fit together when the criminal secret is discovered, partly through the interruptions to the plot linearity and the breaks and frequent gaps in because the process of detection are for the most part displaced from the center of the film by other features” (Kaplan, 2000:77).

The narration, in *Memento*, stems from the single subjective perspective of Leonard and his discontinuous “dialogue” with an invisible interlocutor through the telephone. As he speaks to his invisible correspondent and to his own image in front of a mirror, he indirectly speaks to the audience. The spectator becomes the witness of the traumatic narrative, and the de-



familiarization techniques of editing which are deployed. The paradigmatic construction of the film uses the play of differences as a process of signification. In this case, meaning is not the resultant of a cause and effect model or linear construction of the plot. But meaning rather derives from the aporias, the gaps, and the differences between the elements of the film.

Because the narrative is unstable in *Memento*, a-chronological and fractured, it fits the principles of a puzzle whose pieces do not fit together. The desire to reach the truth is hindered by the unstable mental state of the detective. In principle, "The investigation assumes the truth to be the goal attainable by tracing a logical process of cause and effect, and that every puzzle there is a key through which a complex but coherent pattern will emerge within seemingly anarchic events" (Kaplan, 2000: 77). The system designed by Leonard is based on photographs and written notes as clues in his investigation. Thus Leonard has collected facts like the race (white), gender (male), and (John G) the name of the killer, offers an infinite number of possibilities. If, as Ferdinand de Saussure said, the sign is arbitrary, it constructs Leonard's world into binaries that parallel past versus present, Leonard versus Sammy Jankis, Leonard's wife versus Jankis' wife. Both Jankis and Leonard have the same memory condition and their wives suffer from diabetes. The dedoublement of the main narrator into his nemesis gives clues about his life and more credibility to the story that articulates the visual framing of the investigative narrative through the blind spot or "memoire trouée" of the central protagonist: Leonard. In addition, the nonlinear structure of the film figures trauma not only as a wound but also through the fragmentation of the repetitive storyline. In sum, the film, *Memento*, is an attempt to piece together the overlapping, disjointed, conflicting fragments of memory. The story starts with a rewinding process of the picture and the killing of Teddy by Leonard is repeated in a backward motion, which expresses repetition and replay of the crime scene.

II/ Trauma: Between Forgetting and Remembering

In "Backwards: Memory and Fabula Construction in *Memento* by Christopher Nolan," Stefano Ghislotti argues that:

Memento is a film about memory and oblivion.... It tells the story of a "ten minutes guy", who would be unable, as Sammy Jankis was, to comprehend an



entire film. *Memento* is a film about time passed by, and about remembering. The viewer is invited to use his cognitive and memorial skills to comprehend what the main character is unable to comprehend. If Leonard lacks the possibility of seeing the situation of his current life in its totality, the viewer can take this wide range look. And what the viewer can understand is the center of our interest.

The juxtapositions of the narrative of the lives of Leonard and Samy Jankis are clearly established by the monochrome flashbacks and Leonard's telephone conversations with an invisible correspondent. However, these binary oppositions are blurred when Teddy's (Joe Pantoliano) voice is superimposed on the same narrative destabilizing the spectator's understanding and Leonard's sense of self. As Leonard's predicament mimics that of Samy Jankis, they become one and the same person. This shifting from the "I" (narration) and merging with the "eye" (witness) epitomizes the unstable personality of Leonard. If Teddy helps us reconnect with the story from his perspective, he raises suspicions in the spectator. This dichotomy, at the heart of the character, is reflected through the colors codes which indicate two different chronotopes, contradicting truth and lies alike.

Teddy's vested attempt to help Leonard overcome his mental problems through re-experiencing the initial conditions of his forgotten revenge and re-conducting the investigation failed simply because Leonard's desire to avenge the death of his wife cannot be fulfilled. His wife did not come back to life after he killed the first John G. and she would not come back after he killed Teddy. As a result, his desire for revenge and his inability to remember his revenge do not reside in him but outside since he is unable to fully grasp and process. The unstable mirror shots and fractured characterization of Leonard are indicative of trauma and dissociation.

The violent blow to Leonard's head led not only to his short-term memory condition, but it also marked the turning point in his "doubling" or dissociation. On the one hand, he is an "insurance investigator" and, on the other, a "police investigator." In both capacities, his work consists in establishing the "truth" by finding the murderer of his wife, or the veracity of Samy Jankis' condition. In his quest for truth and vengeance, Leonard kills the drug dealer, takes on his cloths, car and money. In doing so, he embodies ambivalence and excess of social justice in a



society where personal interest seems to be the central motivation. For example, Teddy and Natalie use Leonard to their own advantage. The former uses him to get rid of a drug dealer (Natalie's boyfriend) and the latter to avenge her boyfriend's death.

Leonard's endless pursuit of an idyllic past epitomizes an allegory of the bourgeois ideal for happiness and nuclear family, which the murderer of his wife has taken away from him. As he often says, "the last thing I remember is my wife." These memories of his wife are rendered to the viewers under the form of images underling the core idea in the film that memory is photographic or filmic. Incidentally, these flashbacks about his wife are always in colors while the flashbacks about Samy Jankis are in white and black. Although both events happened prior to his trauma, they have different aesthetic values and implications for the plot. The colors and the black and white are a play of differences to produce meaning on the temporal line. By constructing meaning as the interplay of differences and through binary oppositions (color/Black and white), *Memento* produces meaning from the same differential process, whereby it exploits the color differences and the disjunction between logic and chronology, memory and forgetting. Leonard makes of the body not only a form of papyrus but also a palimpsest-like text where he saves (through inscribing in his flesh the vital facts he cannot hold in his memory) data.

III/Inscribing Memory onto the Body

In Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, "film and photography have inserted themselves between the viewer and reality, becoming what Christina Von Braun has aptly termed a "photomorgana." In other words, "The immobilizing quality of the still photograph—its deathlike fixing of the moment in time—clearly contributes to this perceived incapacity of the photo to maintain its initial power"(Hirsh, 1997: 24). For Barthes "photography signals a dual presence and absence," that is, the "anterior future of which death is at stake" (Hirsh, 1997: 35). The interconnectedness between cinema and photography is subtly introduced at the very beginning of the film. As the picture of a dead body fades and is reintroduced in the camera by Leonard, the bullet jumps back in the gun, the pool of blood retrieves, and Teddy's glass are repositioned on his face, and he is shot, we are introduced to two the symbiosis of picture and movement.

Through an aggregate of pictures, writings, the protagonist who has lost his ability to make new memories uses artificial supports to fix and capture the present instant. Because he



does not trust his memory, Leonard supplements it with facts. In an argument with Natalie, who did not any trust in his pictures, Leonard declares: “Memory's unreliable ... Memory's not perfect. It's not even that good. Ask the police; eyewitness testimony is unreliable ... Memory can change the shape of a room or the color of a car. It's an interpretation, not a record. Memories can be changed or distorted, and they're irrelevant if you have the facts⁵.” For Leonard, the photographs embody factuality.

The Polaroid photos offer Leonard Shelby the possibility to get that factual status and constitute in the same process a post-traumatic memory. Unlike other representational forms, Barthes insists, photography holds a unique relation to the real, defined not through the discourse of artistic representation, but that of magic, alchemy, indexicality, fetishism”(Hirsh, 1997: 5)

The picture enables us to revisit what has been by suspending time and erasing death. Polaroid instant pictures capture on snapshot, instances of the present, which will become “anterior future.” Leonard combines several artificial forms of memory, which he called a “system” to supplement for his fading memory. Leonard’s memory is like the map hanging in his hotel room on which he sticks pictures of the Inn, his car, tattoo parlor, Natalie...He combines pictures (visual memory) and writing (“semantic memory”) so as to reconstruct his “episodic memory” and recollect what he has experienced. For Marianne Hirsh, there is an “[...] ambiguity between the construction of the memory as photograph (an attempt at solidifying the ‘ca etc’) and the chaotic aspect of the image itself (a reintroduction of fluidity and discontinuity) dramatizes the process of constituting the autobiographical subject out of different positions and within the framework of contradictory impulses and desires”(Hirsh: 1997, 203)

The central protagonist Leonard tattoos his body, which becomes a site of memory. This type of tattoo made of digits, symbols, fragments of words and sentences, brings to mind the picture of slavery and that of the survivors of the holocaust on whose hands and backs the slave masters and Nazis had tattooed with numbers and signs of their status or ownership. These marks and numbers stand for the visible signs of the physical suffering and psychological trauma inscribed in the flesh. Similar to the writings inscribed onto his physical body, the memory of his trauma is alive and embedded into his flesh and his soul. The body becomes for Leonard the

⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memento_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memento_(film))



physical and material embodiment of trauma. The tattoos on his body become readable when reflected into a mirror. The mirror image stands for the moment of recognition and marks the entry in Lacan's symbolic realm triggered by the sentence "*remember Sammy Jankis.*"

We see or hear at least eight times the sentence "Remember Sammy Jankins", which becomes a sort of motto of the film itself. While the sentence is intended to remind Leonard of his weakness, it becomes a sort of label, placed in parts of the film where it is necessary to remind the situation of a man without memory. The systematic use of this tag is a reminder for the viewer. While it is difficult to construct a story that flows from the end to the beginning, we are invited to a different type of activity. We are invited to compare the situations of the characters. Sammy Jankis' story is a way to connect our attention to Leonard's condition, which is similar.

The story of Sammy Jankis, case Leonard remembers to have worked on as a claim investigator for a California insurance company, echoes his current situation. A case in point, Sammy Jankis failed to reorganize his life after he lost his memory. As Leonard underlined, "Samy wrote himself a ridiculous amount of notes." Unlike Samy, Leonard is organized and effective in using writing and photos to make sense of the world and guide his actions. Unwilling, he is manipulated by Teddy in the killing of Jimmy (a drug dealer and Natalie's boyfriend) and by Natalie in the killing of Teddy. Like in the Renaissance Revenge Tragedies, Leonard is driven by his desire for revenge. As he tries to establish the rule of the father or the law, he goes on a relentless attempt to find his wife's killer. In order to achieve his life mission, Leonard's tattoos his limbs and body with facts and bits of sentences. Similarly, *Memento* makes an interesting use of the code of colors to signify temporality but above all memory or re-memory.

IV/The Color Codes of Trauma

The film *Memento* alternates color sequences with black and white sequences. These color codes which signify past (black and white) and present (colors) are used to signify the



memory before the traumatic event during which Leonard lost his memory. These flashbacks are represented in colors whereas the re-memory of the short past (after accident are in black and white).

This film is often used to show the distinction between plot and story. The film's events unfold in two separate, alternating narratives — one in color, and the other in black-and-white. The black-and-white sections are told in chronological order, showing Leonard conversing with an anonymous phone caller in a motel room. Leonard's investigation is depicted in color sequences that are in reverse chronological order. As each sequence begins, the audience is unaware of the preceding events, just like Leonard, thereby giving the viewer a sense of his confusion. By the film's end when the two narratives converge we understand the investigation and the events that lead up to Teddy's death⁶.

In classical Hollywood cinema, the color code is used to mark flashbacks referring to different temporalities. A case in point is the TV series, *Kunfu: The Legend Continues* with David Carrabin, wherein the constant flashbacks are in white and black contrasting with the present in colors. They represent past, whose past-ness or remoteness (black and white) is depicted in opposition to the present (colors). This is unusual, in that, in modern film flashbacks are often in black and white to represent the past in opposition to the present (colors). The flashbacks operate instead like flash-forwards because they move the narrative forward without breaking the temporal line. The narrative being a-chronological, spectator does not have a sense of the return to a past different to the present. Past and present paradigms signified differences, but they are not indicative of a sense of the fluidity of time. In sum, the color codes point to the ambiguity of memory in that the memory of loss is vivid and alive. This also shows how Leonard's forceful reclamation of his past impossible and his desire strong. As Leonard significantly points out in an angry exchange with Natalie, "memory can change the size of a room, the color of a car," thus heavy his reliance on facts (pictures).

⁶ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memento_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memento_(film))



The color codes and the flashbacks develop into two possible story lines. On the one hand, Leonard and his wife versus Jankis and his wife are brought together to shed light on Leonard Shelby's current predicament. To Stefano Ghislotti,

The question posed by the viewer at this point is obviously why this form of presentation has been adopted. A possible hypothesis concerns artistic motivation; another, more detailed, is about the possibility of showing an event as inevitable, because it has already happened. The reverse motion documents a fact which has already happened, and goes back to the moment in which a different choice was still possible.⁷

Nolan uses different colors and a regressive/progressive narrative mode to construct meaning and reflect the main character's mental condition. In this way, "The film is interesting because it reflects the absence of the past in its narrative structure. As an effect of composition, the main character's memory disease is directly perceptible to the viewers. Building upon the dialectical relationship between black and white colors, Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie underscore Greimas' construction of basic units or "semes" in *L'analyse des films*:

Algirdas-Julien Greimas dans son premier livre *Sémantique structurale* (1966), il pose la structure élémentaire de la sémantique comme reposant sur un couple "conjonction+disjonction". Par exemple dans le cas de l'opposition entre **blanc** et **noir**, on a une disjonction (=opposition des significations) et une conjonction (=le fait qu'il s'agit de deux qualités comparables); l'existence de cette conjonction définit un axe sémantique (ici, celui de la couleur); plus précisément, cet axe sémantique joint les éléments de signification(ce que Greimas appelle des **semes**: ici, la **blancheur** et la **noirceur**) contenus dans les termes envisagés.(p.100)

⁷ Stefano Ghislotti, "Backwards: Memory and Fabula Construction in Memento by Christopher Nolan", *Film Anthology*, Internet Review of Film and Cinema, 2003 [<http://www.unibg.it/fa>]



The “conjunction/disjunction” dyad produces meaning through oppositions. *Memento* alternates color sequences with white and black images to indicate the rupture of the chronotope (time/space), and the suture of different temporalities. The color code distinguishes between past and present, forgetting and remembering. This makes time into a key agent in the structuring process of the film.

In other words, the color code operates through binary formation of subjectivity as the character produces spaces, through his narrative, “truncated” by his memory and his traumatic experience. This is the mark of trauma and melodramatic quest for elusive past. Unlike the bourgeois capitalistic and ideology of reproduction, memories are recalled as fragments of what cannot be fully grasped. Memory cannot be relived. They can only be recalled, brought in the present. The re-memory of romantic moments encompasses the only sequences in the film when music is added to the pictures. To remember the past is possible through narration or performance. As such, Leonard narrates the vivid memory of his wife and he also tried to get another woman to embody his wife. In the process of this performative act of remembrance, Leonard, ironically, ritualistically burns the items (comb, doll, clock, book), which remind him of his wife “he can’t remember to forget.”

This ritualistic process of purification is a desperate attempt to erase the material traces of the survival of his wife after death. The burnt artifacts have the same symbolic value as the photograph he often takes to constitute new memories. Leonard Shelby is possessed by the memory of his wife and he does not need it to materialize because it is with him. This is the reason why he needs to inscribe the fluctuating, evasive present on his body through a form of “self-inflicted violence”, an act which is symptomatic of trauma as a mode of inscription onto the body. As Leonard’s body becomes a palimpsest in the sense that it begets stories.

Conclusion

Memento is a film noir in that it is the story of a man who investigates the rape/murder of his wife. However, the film is totally grounded into the contradiction of the investigative narrative structure because the clues of the investigation do not corroborate an ultimate truth or establish culpability. Leonard’s desire to avenge the death of his wife and also his desire to “get



his life back” are the driving forces of this film. Leonard’s desire to find the murderer of his wife is rooted in his sense of incompleteness, of lack. The power of recalling the cherished past and the strong desire to relive it is a futile attempt since the past is what is no more. As Edward Branigan accurately puts out “desire is always a lack and so always lacking: the play of desire is a ceaseless lack of satisfaction” (1984:12). Teddy’s death at the hands of Leonard is the signifier of that endless desire and lack. This ultimately shows the failure of the cure Teddy thought re-experiencing the investigation could bring to Leonard. This model of healing mirrors the bourgeois ideology of the fulfillment of human desire. Memory being a site, revisiting memory did not result into restoration or to the suture of the dissociated self.

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